

Déjà vu

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"Madame, would you like to sit down?" The boy, preppy in his school uniform, his cross-grained hair smoothed down with water, smiled and jumped up. Coughing and wheezing, she sat down in the front row, thanking the child with a nod of her head. The passengers in the bus were preoccupied with their newspapers or gazed ahead bored. She, by contrast, enjoyed the view from the front window. The lively comings and goings of the streets of Paris glided before her like on a movie screen.

The bus, Line 92, Place de la République to Trocadéro, stopped right in front of Marie's front door in the Rue du Temple. This route was her only connection to the outside world, for the old woman could only walk a few steps. She had been living in this neighbourhood for over 70 years. As concierge in the elegant apartment building, many people had crossed her path. She had been witness to many happy moments and lived to see tragic destinies. These days nobody needed her concierge duties anymore. The house was taken care of by a property management firm. The building's administration office had given her a small apartment that she could stay in for the rest of her life with a tiny kitchen and a dark bedroom next to the janitor's office near the entrance. All Marie had left were her memories. Dog photos decorated the walls: pictures of apricot coloured Lapin, a female miniature poodle, and of grey-black Mimi, a mongrel. Pierre, the former owner of the newspaper kiosk in front of the house and the only person with whom she had exchanged more than the perfunctory "hello" and "good day" greetings, had often teased her about the two small dogs, who truly did not belong to the most noble and beautiful specimens. But Marie had loved and spoiled those four-legged creatures and the residents of the house had gotten used to their yapping.

Pierre, Lapin and Mimi had long been dead now. Marie would have to celebrate her 93rd birthday alone. Her hair, which was still died black, was so thin her scalp showed through. And her threadbare fur coat had bare spots. The lines crisscrossed her powdered face like the weaving of a spider's web. The scarce eyebrows had been carefully traced over with brown pencil. The lines had long ago stopped making the once bold round arcs and now consisted of scrawling strokes painted by Marie's shaky hand.

It was only during the bus ride that Marie felt young and mobile again. Sometimes she even felt like she had travelled back in time. The hectic street traffic and the modern glass palaces of the Centre Pompidou or the Forum Les Halles disappeared before her vacant eyes and old, long forgotten pictures appeared again. Leisure coaches and even horse carriages dominated the wide boulevards lined with magnificent buildings. Marie didn't waste a glance at the huge shopping centre and supermarkets. She thought of the old shops and market booths with their artistically displayed wares: the fruits and vegetables bright yellow, orange, red, green, and violet; fish, clams and shrimp in wooden crates from which water dripped onto the sidewalk. Dark red juicy cuts of meat, pink hams and golden wheels of cheese - everything within reach before the eyes of the buyer - without refrigerated shelves and plastic wrapped packaging. The second-hand booksellers along the quay of the Seine offered antiques for sale, harbouring literary treasures in their vendors trays, leather bindings with gold embossing. The tourists with their video cameras and basket ball caps, their Adidas tennis shoes and back packs who peopled the street cafés didn't notice Marie, whose memories of poshly dressed women

and elegant men of Paris society, relaxing with a café au lait in the bistro, came to life again.

Those days she had gone strolling along the illuminated Champs Elysées herself and had gazed in the windows of the elegant stores. She had drunk lemonade on Sundays on the café terrace of the Jardins du Luxembourg and watched the children who had laughed at the puppet shows on the green lawn before the Guignol Theater or who had ridden the carousel. On holidays she took the train to Versailles, where the perfume of the lemon trees whispered of the magic of the south.

She had experienced all of this on Richard's arm. And he had steadfastly promised her that they would first take Paris, and then the world! And no, not just Europe! He wanted to explore with her the rivers of Africa with their mangrove thickets and the temples of Southeast Asia whose golden roofs glistened in the sun. And they should see America! The big cities on the east coast, whose office buildings were a hundred stories high, higher than the Eiffel Tower.

Richard was a marine boatman on a freighter ship and at home on all seven seas. He raved about the sunsets on the South Sea, revered the ferocity of Cape Horn, and recounted endless horror stories about pirates and sea monsters. Marie knew that he sometimes made things up, spinning them into a web of a sailor's yarn. But she loved his laugh, his shining eyes and his mischievous glance. She liked to listen to him and was enraptured by his fascinating narrations. It was never boring being with him, he surprised her every day with something new. Once, while on shore leave, he drove with her to the Normandy where his ship lay at harbour. She was allowed to go on board with him and look around in this strange world on tarred planks. She was amazed at the cramped sleeping quarters and the Spartan furniture. But Richard laughed. "Who cares when you have the vast ocean instead? When dolphins swim next to your ship, when you can feel the wind in your nose?" He was a seaman with every bone in his body and she knew she wouldn't be able to keep him in Paris. No dew would be thick enough to keep him on land. No house would be big enough to give him enough air to breathe. She could feel it when he would spend two to three weeks on land with her. A quivering went through his body, he emanated a feeling of disquiet, as if he lacked the drug to which he was addicted. He missed the endless ocean, the freedom of the sea. While he spoke, his thoughts went elsewhere, his eyes looked aimlessly out into the distance and stayed glued to the horizon. She could feel his longing, and let him go. She never tried to get him to stay, but instead, was happy when he returned to her again.

Then came the day when she waited for him to no avail. His ship should have docked three days ago in Le Havre, he should have long arrived at her home in the capital. But he didn't come. Marie felt, knew that something terrible had happened. She knew it long before the letter from the shipping company arrived. The ship had sunk in a storm before the coast of Patagonia. "Hopefully he still had a chance to see an albatross" was the thought that went through Marie's head. Richard loved those majestic birds. He loved the elegance with which they sailed for kilometres over the water without a flutter to disturb their airless glide. The breadth of their sweeping wings was his measure of the freedom of the ocean.

Marie stayed alone after Richard's death. No other man took his place. He was unique, the well-travelled seaman, who was at home in the whole world.

She withdrew to the loneliness of her small apartment. Better alone with the dogs at the entrance of the stately house on Place de la République and watch the world through the windowpanes of her concierge loge.

Over time Marie's body became more ponderous, her legs refused to serve her. She could only do her shopping with difficulty. The heavy bag was a burden to her and when she returned to the semi-dark kitchen, she dragged herself to the sofa, exhausted. But her eyes were still wide-awake – and hungry. Although she had neither seen Africa nor Asia, America nor the South Seas, the streets of Paris offered an adventure every day. She was too old to jump into the hustle and bustle, to let herself go with the flow through the streets. But Marie loved the ride on line 92 and savoured the sense of freedom it gave her. You could watch big city life through the windows of the bus, as if you sat in a box seat at the theatre.

She couldn't see enough of the theatre that Paris daily performed for her: art museums that advertised their exhibits on huge posters, policemen, who closed off avenues for official state visitors or for parades. Students from all over the world crowded the boutiques and bookstores of St. Germain. Foreign guests, in imaginative garments, strolled along the wide boulevards shopping in one noble department store to the next. Film teams, whose actors in costume brought stories back to life. Africans who sold their carvings of elephants and giraffes on dirty red velvet blankets spread on the sidewalk before them. Neon lights advertised movie premiers and radio stations on the building facades. The shop windows of genteel jewellery stores attracted the rich and the beautiful. Porters in elegant uniforms waited in front of luxury hotels to silently sink the long limousines of their guests into the underground garages. Small hidden restaurants of fine dining, gourmet temples with tiny tables placed one against the other, which only admitted their regular patrons and their friends. The Bateaux-Mouches, the tour boats, sailed leisurely down the Seine as loudspeakers announced points of interest to the passengers which could be heard to the banks of the river. Art lovers from around the world crowded around the Louvre, forming long lines in front of the ticket office to see Mona Lisa and Co.

When the bus drove along the *Tuileries* where she often had gone for a walk with Richard, memories came back to her. She saw his eyes, his smile and smelled the whiff of sea and tar which had always encircled him. Sometimes she felt as if she could feel the strong pressure of his hand on her shoulder.

While she travelled the streets of the capital, the past and present mixed together and Marie could escape the loneliness of her cramped apartment and travelled through time. Every day on line 92, *Place de la République* to *Trocadéro*. And back again.